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Written by Park Chan-kyong in 2001 and recently translated by Dr Soyang Park, “Notes on the ‘Conceptual Realism’—An Editor’s Annotation” is to be published in spring 2015 in book form, provisionally titled *Interference: Archive and Beyond—Korean Art Criticism*. This excerpted text is one of four writings that the critic Gim Jonggil selected for the upcoming book.

Conceived by Art Space Pool under the directorship of the curator Heejin Kim, and further developed in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong, *Interference* is a compilation of critical essays, manifestos, interviews, and curatorial texts written by active practitioners in Korea including artists, curators, critics, and theorists from the late 1960s and onwards.

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Notes on the “Conceptual Realism”—An Editor’s Annotation *

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The State of Korean Avant-garde 1—Modernism

First of all, let’s talk about the formalist simplification of modern art by the Korean art world. It is an error to believe that the notorious discussion of “flatness” concerning modern art only occurred abroad. There existed some discussions on the flatness within the Korean art world until the early 1980s and this smeared into the pedantic art critical discourse by art critics like Lee Yil. It is difficult to follow his writings at times during this period due to the lack of clear stances and contradictory nature of his writings. However, it is clear that the discourses of flatness and abstraction at that time were used and abused in order for the institutional justification of *art informel* and monochrome.¹ Clement Greenberg argued that the artistic resistance to the corrupt culture of capitalism of his time was possible only through the achievement of the flatness which was the purest characteristic of painting. The Korean discourse however omitted the line from the Greenberg’s critical arguments, the kitsch is the corrupt culture of bourgeoisie.² This omission meant to remove Greenberg’s relationship to Trotsky, and this was due to the fact that mentioning his name itself was regarded as criminal at that time, where the omission marks aesthetic as well as political actions. Even if Greenberg were wrong, he proposed his argument as an alternative and as an elitist Marxist based on his specific historical consciousness. Meanwhile, the disregard of Greenberg’s “historical consciousness” by Korean apologists seems to demonstrate their political indifference or lack of understanding about the modernism discourse as a whole.

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This is an excerpted version of Park's lengthy essay, first published by Alternative Space Pool (now Art Space Pool), under the title “‘Gaenyeomjeok hyeonsiljuui’ noteu–han pyeonjibjaui ju” in *Forum A*, no. 9 (2001): 19–24.

¹ . Trans. Note: Park CK, the author criticized these discourse as “the bounced cheques to buy up their institutional territory.”

² . Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina, (1939; New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 21–23.

As much as this vulgar adaptation of Marxism by Greenberg was attractive and ambiguous, it can also be regarded as a critical disaster. But the real disaster is found in the fact that it was once again vulgarized by Korean art critics and art professors, where the context they were in was very different from the original Euro-American context where Greenberg's discourse came from. Through this vulgarization they attempted to construct a sustainable system for the preferred aesthetic value underpinned by the powerful myth of "international art." This system was furnished through the process in which the rhetoric of Korean modernism eradicated the political and aesthetic radicality innate in modernism. There have been diverse criticisms about how Lee Yil and his followers were tainted by "dreadful secondariness"³ that had manifested through their adaptation and utilization of Western art and discourse according to their institutional needs. However, there has been less attention paid to the study of the details of how this vulgarization took place. First of all, an important step in the vulgarization process was their failure to recognize and develop the original political context and the implication of the discourse in order to apply it to a new context. This resulted in the conservative turning of the domestic abstractionist art scene (i.e., represented by art informel and monochrome) into mere endorsements of "art for art sake," thereby preventing people from understanding "the rational core" of Euro-American modernism discourse.

The counter-argument for the art critical and art historical developments was not proposed from the Korean art world but from within the Western art world itself, notably English and American criticism. Greenberg argued that the flatness was an imitation of the structure of the object, but not the object itself, and the purity of the medium presented from this imitation was presented as a resistance to the kitsch. In dispute, T.J. Clark, who was a member of the English section of the Situationist International, criticized the ideas of Greenberg that the flatness found in the paintings of Manet, Pissarro and Cézanne, the original avant-garde members of the history of European modern art, retain social implications in the ways in which their canvases sensationalized the familiar way of seeing of the bourgeoisie. This marks their paintings as cases and expressions of radical modernity. That is, the flatness and "ambiguity" in these paintings were seen as a critique of the bourgeois spectacle that underpinned their own self-serving illusion, which was then seen as corrupt. In other words, what is important to note is the tension between what art shows and the physicality of art, and not the purity of the medium itself. Thus the social context

³ . Edward W. Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 15.2 (1989): 207.

determines the value of flatness, and the tendency that reveals the characteristics of the medium itself should be seen as a social message. That is, what seems literal can indeed be a metaphor, and here the statement that my art professors used to advocate “art is not literature” that was attractive to many artists, becomes obsolete (I suffered from this statement when I first heard it in my freshman year of the university in Seoul).

The formalist statement “art is not literature” cannot be easily overcome. Of course, it would be easier for an artist to pay attention to the problem of this statement in the context of his/her own practice, but because modern Korean art as a whole has not considered the problem of formalist doctrine enough and adopted the question into part of its own consciousness. It also is true that many of these ideas were proposed not through well-constructed or professional arguments but were having an effect just as circulating stories in a belief system. Even the critical artists or writers themselves had not equipped themselves with proper critical language to come up with a strong counter-argument, while they continue to subscribe to ad hoc imported theories such as the institutional critique⁴ and the theory of cultural imperialism.⁵ This has evoked somewhat simplistic resistance to the formalist imperatives where the idea of “art is not literature” still seems to haunt even the *minjung* (grassroots or common people) artist’s unconsciousness. While Korean artists at times claimed to invent “Korean-style modernism,” in actuality, however, they never understood Western modernism in the historical context of the Western reality,⁶ thus making the problem more difficult to resolve.

Coming back to Korean modern art discourses, Lee Yil wrote “It (the Korean informel) is an outcry, the art of explosion and the art of human existence that brings the human existence to the essence. And finally our artists found the innovative way to join the front of global avant-garde art by accepting art informel or action painting.”⁷ Lee also unsuccessfully argued that art informel could be equal to American modern art because the art informel was a kind of abstract expressionism that came from the psychological wounds of the Korean War (and also both emphasize the flatness.) However, this is quite an absurd argument. It is important to note that he should not have argued Korean modernism as

⁴ . Trans. Note: The discourse of institutional critique was used to expose the conservative formation of Korean art institution.

⁵ . Trans. Note: They used theories of cultural imperialism to critique Korean art world being succumbed to Eurocentric cultural order.

⁶ . Trans. Note: This may sound very Eurocentric argument specific to the author’s writing style but his intention was to critique that Korean artists/critics failed to understand the specificity of modernism, but rather universalizing it.

⁷ . Lee Yil, *Hyeondae misului sigak* [Viewpoints on modern art] (Seoul: Mijinsa, 1984).

modernism. When we admit that Korean modernism is not the same as the conventional modernism that is based on the Western model, it can be treated more fairly, and then the suppression of the original, radical, and avant-garde aspects of modernism can be withheld. In this situation, introducing the debates within the US art world on the modernism between Greenberg and Michael Fried and their original contexts can be a subversive disclosure.

Of course, this can be criticized as another way of self-colonialization as if I attempt to criticize Korean modernism through reciting the logic of Western modernism. But what I clumsily attempt to do here is to illustrate the scene and the manner in which the colonization of discourse has taken place, not to restore the Western discourses of modernism for its own sake. The idea that Korean modernism did not need to be *the* modernism with regard to its historical need (for instance, locality), also means that the imagination to revive Western modernism in the Korean context is inappropriate. And the significance of understanding the parallax within spaces is already innate in theories of modernism (or the aesthetic modernity) itself. The essence of modernism that signifies here and now, already makes the idea of universality impossible or only makes it a relative or paradoxical concept. Modernity itself is already multiple; it can only complete itself by arriving at the various plural array of differences, which one may argue then equates with postmodernity.

For instance, the art historical meaning of the American minimalism that the Korean monochrome school seemed to have made a close reference to and universalized as the foremost expression of modern art, has been debated among US critics since the 1990s. This debate is about whether minimalism should be regarded as a retrogression of modernism, as Fried argued, or a transitional form towards a conceptualism or postmodernism, as Hal Foster argued. Minimalism pushed the physicality of “the phenomenological experience” to the extreme and demonstrated its impossibility as Foster stated:

As an analysis of perception, minimalism prepared a further analysis of the conditions of perception. This led to a critique of the spaces of art (as in the work of Michael Asher), of its exhibition conventions (as in Daniel Buren), of its commodity status (as in Hans Haacke)—in short, to a critique of the institution of art. . . . history is mostly a genealogy of the presentational strategies of the readymade. Yet, as we have seen, this narrative also leaves out a crucial concern: the sexual-linguistic constitution of the subject. For the most part this concern is left out of the art as well, for, again, even as minimalism turned from the objective orientation of formalism to the subjective orientation of

phenomenology, it tended to position artist and viewer alike not only as historically innocent but as sexually indifferent, and the same holds for much conceptual and institution-critical work that followed minimalism.⁸

The argument is that minimalism and post-minimalism still belong to the modernist project as they radically rearranged the relation between what the work of art shows and the way the work of art exists. But he continued to argue that instead of understanding the subject and object of art within the domain of perception or the institutional context (as in modernism), the act of viewing them in the wider context of class, racial, sexual and linguistic relations and as social and linguistic constructs marks postmodernism. Postmodernism here is a new paradigm that helps endow minimalism with a new meaning beyond the modernist rendering. It is the critical interest of Hal Foster to present postmodernism as a critical discourse challenging the late capitalism and institute postmodernism within the genealogy of the historical avant-garde, which operates within the dialectic of its continuity and discontinuity. Now let's postpone the debates around conceptualism, the key subject of this essay, for later and discuss the problems of minjung art.

The State of Korean Avant-Garde 2—Minjung Art

The debates of critics like Clark and Foster demonstrate a comprehensive critique of the vision of bourgeois formalism and demonstrate their effort to justify their resistance to such formalist vision and to support the expansion of conceptualism; however, minjung art as a radical art movement which emerged in South Korea hasn't achieved such outcome.⁹ Why didn't it happen? Briefly speaking, it must have been due to the different situation of South Korean society and culture from that of the US. Among notable factors is that although modernism was introduced and adapted by the Korean art world, the essence of it has never been part of their consciousness.¹⁰ Nonetheless, we cannot blame the fact that Cezanne, Manet, and Courbet were not in our art museum.

⁸ . Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), 59.

⁹ . Trans. Note: What author mean here is the apologists of minjung art have not conducted such level of the layered and detailed discussions against the formalism based on their assessment of the modern art development in Korea.

¹⁰ . Trans. Note: This argument gets repetitive in his writing as if the author seems preoccupied with the idea that a thorough understanding Western modernism is a mandatory course for the Korean artists to achieve their modernity.

What was deficient in the Korean art world was indeed, borrowing Hal Foster, the realistic constructiveness.¹¹ That is, how to answer the questions like “who is the audience?” and “what kind of existence do they have?” Where the artwork comes from and how it produces an effect are tied to the idea of here and now specific to time and space. And the audience addressed in this discussion of here and now is not concerning the subject that is metaphysically inferred as Fried argued for, but is a subject that is psychologically, socially, perceptually, politically and sexually defined; the difference of its identity will be repeated, returned, and renewed, which avant-garde artists have actively interacted with. In this sense, the audience we are talking about is disconnected from modern discourse and is connected to what has been conferred in the postmodern discourse.

To repeat, what has survived in the Korean art scene is “kitsch” art that Greenberg argued against. This art is also the arbitrary symbols and banal expressions that are far from having the quality that Michael Fried noted through the term, the “presentness,” and are defined by the fake and tiring promise of infinity. Minjung art also suffered from this tendency and has become the kitsch following the parallel route.

Through the 1990s, minjung art seems to have become kitsch in four different ways. The first traces back to the art history before the nineteenth century, which refers mostly to academic style, figurative paintings shown in galleries. This reflects how the experience of modernity for Korean artists were filtered through the flat reproduction of the modern paintings from the art magazines imported from Japan, where the sense of reality was castrated from the image and from which their artistic self-consciousness was formed. This is a common condition and consciousness of artists living in the Third World or neo-colonial regions, where the problem is regardless of whether they saw the original art work or not, they were not aware of the fact that they do not contain actual reality.¹²

The second way of minjung art becoming kitsch is found in the art practices that instrumentalized the arts for the political purposes. Through the famous theory of the “gear and screw” of Lenin, meaning the unity of art and politics, they justified the instrumentalization of culture. In many cases, the first and the second ways are interconnected.

The third way is found in art practices taking the form of conceptual installation but still maintains thenineteenth century symbolic order. This tendency is found in the work of

¹¹ . Trans. Note: That is, one’s concrete understanding of one’s own reality in context.

¹² . Trans. Note: The author means that they are mere images, aesthetic signs derived from a specific historical time and space.

art in transition from minjung art to installation art, from the painting to the object, or among the works of opportunistic artists who sensed the crisis of Korean modernism. Finally, it is also found in the tendency to pertain to the narcissistic sentimentalism or revive sage-like rhetoric. The reason why the sequel novels and TV drama like *Moraesigae* (The Sandglass) can be able to distance itself from the excessive political attention, was because it suppressed the revival of the political consciousness in anticipated viewership by locking the story in the past. That is, all these minjung art forms trapped the modernity that they pursued in simplistic images and clichéd forms. The forms connected themselves to the past only in a reminiscent way, and avoided the question of “here and now.”

This discussion is also in part my effort to read the influence of the history, such as the expansion of certain institutional democracy, the collapse of the Soviet and the Eastern bloc, and the growth of mass media and technological development on the Korean art world. The microscopic shift in the art world that has underpinned the decline of minjung art evolved from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The critique of the process in which minjung art has become kitsch is the evidence that minjung artists did not understand the political implication of “representation” within capitalist society, nor the representation within the socialist state, beyond understanding “the background” or context from which a radical art emerges. For instance, while *geolgae*, or wall banner was understood as the enlargement of a painting, minjung painting was also understood as a miniature of *geolgae*. The important point here is the scale.¹³ The problem is that this attitude does not distinguish minjung art from the media politics of advertisement. Both request uncritical viewership.

For a proper critique of minjung art, we should go beyond the justification of the minjung art tied to its ethical and political legitimacy. The discussion of the political and aesthetic values require different criteria, and the evaluation thus should not be conducted as if they stand on equal terms. It is deeply concerning that adverse thinking (i.e., the political is aesthetic) is still more popular. Again, it is important not to leave minjung art in an uncritical domain due to its historical legitimacy.

This is also the reason why our discussion must gain new currency now. That is, modernism and minjung art were the two paradigms and concepts contested in the 1980s’ South Korean art scene. As well, our discussion of the legacy of these art movements has been limited by the meanings endowed specifically from this context. But now we should deconstruct these terms from the historical confinement so that new discussion and

¹³ . Trans. Note: The author implies here that their representational strategy is limited to the manipulation of size without more sophisticated contextual and semiotic consideration.

understanding of the modern art and minjung art are possible. To explain further, capitalism has become better understood through the 1990s where the establishment of the civil government, the experiences of the international monetary fund (IMF) crisis and the neoliberalism took their effects, the newly experienced intensity and complexity of capitalism, its unabashed presence and its durability (seemingly infinite) were felt deeply through the bodies of Korean intellectuals. This made Korean artists pay more attention to the microscopic world and movements where capitalism once again appeared to be a major object of struggle. The mass themselves no longer identified capitalism with the civil society¹⁴ and provided the context where the notion of the political that minjung artists were once concerned also needs to be revised.

Admittedly my discussion so far is quite schematized and may sound quite simplistic. But I hope this can explain how the offspring of minjung art and modernism have become a tendency that has ceased to challenge the dominant orders. The reasons why all resistant gestures anticipate their appropriation and so many practices and challenges are found from the Hongdae (Hongik University) area to Rodin Gallery, are not sustained. It is because they haven't quite overcome the patterns of the past avant-gardes I have discussed so far. As I noted earlier, I shall discuss what we would learn as well as unlearn from the modernism and realism (the minjung avant-garde) of the previous generations.

The Renewal of Realism

In this account, you might be able to anticipate the realism that I want to discuss is not such that you have been familiarized yourself with over several years, or the traditional representational art of photorealism, or the simple mimetic system of objects, or an illusionistic realism, but something that is close to the opposite of these. As realism as a foreign concept tends to allude to specific art historian trends, I suggest using *hyeonsiljuui*, the Korean term for realism, but which can be used more comprehensive way than narrowly defined realism. There is no point to recapitulate the general history of *hyeonsiljuui* as a specific style and creative method here, but we must continue to use this concept in a new way since there are no other terms available to address the value and comprehensive attitude towards life.

This must have been the reason why many artists have claimed their art as realism

¹⁴ . Trans. Note: During the 1980s's democratization struggle, the term civil society was often identified with the middle class consciousness thus anti-revolutionary, but after 1990s, such perception was revised.

regardless of the different opinions of critics, and there is no question that each of these realist art practices, despite their differences, focus on the value system and aesthetics that emphasize reality. The problem is how to effectively distinguish this general aesthetics of realism from other illusionistic art like the naturalism or socialist realism and re-appropriate it. The conceptually oriented *hyeonsiljuui* takes the essence from modernism and minjung art while still retaining the paradoxical forces produced from the clashes of terms combined here. The unpredictable and unconventional imaginations and clashes of meanings that occur from this fusion itself are the driving force of the conceptual realism that I am proposing here.

We examined the intensity and different horizons of the critique of realism by considering the Western debates of postmodernism, and have emphasized that “reality” is that which has been constantly returned or reclaimed through the critique of the autonomy of art recurring in the history of modern art debates. This, in other words, echoes what Fredric Jameson noted not to abandon the political-economic analysis and the frame of interpretation nor blindly subscribe to it.¹⁵ That is, we should remember that the recolonization of the world by the multinational capitalism in the era of the late capitalism is still the important place to start and from which to map out the culture of the contemporary era.

It is doubtful if the dictum “cultural logic and political logic are not congruous” is really plausible. It is also doubtful if the politics of the spectacle of biennales, the art information tainted by self-colonization, and the art world which is amalgamated in an international commodity market, can be understood independently from the multinational capitalist movement. This sounds as if we can lay a blind eye on what is going on right before us. Perhaps the insightful note of Jameson, “the totality is not representable but we cannot say we are not be able to know it,”¹⁶ might provide an epistemological stance that the expanded sense of realism we are discussing here can rely on. I don’t know if anyone remembers the famous concept from Jameson’s text ten years ago, “cognitive mapping,” which is “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.”¹⁷ And he continued to note that “if there is any realism left here, it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that

¹⁵ . Trans. Note: The author is introducing Jameson’s ideas as they provide an important method of recognizing the reality.

¹⁶ . Trans. Note: The author’s words may sound misleading here but he affirms what Jameson noted as the singularity of the capital as an absent presence which through our fragmented concepts and perceptions, we are destined to search for understanding of its operation as “the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.”

¹⁷ . Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Duke University Press, 1992), 54.

confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.”¹⁸

My inquiry comes down to this: reality is too fragmented to represent itself and it is hypocritically integrated. However, it is not that we do not recognize the late capitalism as a historically specific and dominant reality, this still provides the space for new realism that stands on the “epistemological discontinuity” between science and ideology, and existence and representation. In other words, the realism is a map based on the rich understanding and recognition of the situation where the effect of meaning replaces the meaning. This is not another “objective” map making, but a *hyeonsiljuui* as a new mapping method that looks for the route in the age of the movement of transnational capitalism that proliferates like rhizome without roots and stems. (Slavoj Žižek) It is also important to recognize that the characteristics of the late capitalism are found in the condition where the politics are entirely aestheticized and intertwined with the culture, where the discussion of the late capitalism does not just address the politico-economical domain. The *hyeonsiljuui* here is different from the realism of the previous era, which was based on a representational aesthetics or methods grounded in the totalizing recognition of the truth.¹⁹ The *hyeonsiljuui* indicates a different kind of realism; iIn this, reality is not what already exists but what an artist recognizes and an audience discovers. It is a temporary reality reconstructed by the human intervention from the given structure, and to put it simply, a reality reconstructed and mobilized in the specifically drawn map of reality.

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Translator’s Note: “Trans. Note” in this text echoes the spirit of this project, entitled Interference where the translator acknowledges her presence as one who mediates the cross-cultural understanding of the meanings and texts rather than alluding to or pretending a transparent and unmediated role. Besides, these notes have two significant practical purposes. The first is to help the readers better understand the author’s arguments derived from the

¹⁸ . Ibid., 25.

¹⁹ . Trans. Note: See the poet Kim Chi Ha’s argument in his “Hyeonsil dongin jeil seoneon” [The first declaration of art collective Reality] published in 1969. My translation of the excerpted manifesto will be included in this book.

specific Korean context, and the second is to unravel the author's argument which can be quite misleading when translated word-for-word.

References

[The translation of author's references is forthcoming.—Ed.]